

The Malatesta Club



A short account of the celebrated anarchist Malatesta Club of 1950s London.

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and that club membership cards would be issued. Writing again in *Freedom* on April 17th, Peeke called for donations of kitchenware.

Tables and chairs were bought for the Club from a sympathetic furniture dealer in the SPGB.

A cooker was installed and a sink plumbed in.

The opening of the Club was finally announced by Sansom in *Freedom* on April 24th for the 2nd May.

The Club opened on May Day 1954 at 155 High Holborn, “nearly opposite the old Holborn Town Hall”. It consisted of one “largish basement with two small rooms adjoining”. Apart from Philip Sansom, other founding members were Rita Milton, Irene Brown, her partner Donald Rooum, Max Patrick, Frank Hirshfield and Rufus Segar. Segar contributed a good share of the initial work setting up the Club. He had been a conscientious objector during the Second World War, serving a 3 months sentence for refusing to submit to a medical examination. He went on to be cover illustrator for the first series of *Anarchy* edited by Colin Ward.

A team of three on a rotating basis managed each evening and were in charge of refreshments and whatever event was to be put on as well as cleaning. These volunteers were from the London Anarchist Group and the *Freedom* Press Group, with one or two unaffiliated individuals.

Among those drawn into anarchism by the Malatesta club were the Hungarian exile John Rety and journalist and washboard player with the Vipers Skiffle Group, John Pilgrim. As was noted in Freedom: "Many visitors expressed their delight at the free and easy atmosphere and its unique character". John Rety was publishing a bohemian Soho magazine at the time (1954), The Intimate Review, and he suggested that Pilgrim go along to investigate. Pilgrim returned with a favourable opinion, and both began to attend regularly (Pilgrim is an excellent washboard player and the Vipers' second disk, the energetic "Don't You Rock Me Daddy-O" got to number 10 in the 1957 UK Singles Chart).

Sunday evening lectures were put on by the London Anarchist Group and these were "packed with standing room only for the late-comers". There were lectures on Ill-Health and Health, (given by John Hewetson), The Press, African Nationalism, Problem Families, etc., The first of the lectures on May 2nd itself was given by F.A. Ridley on The Revolutionary Tradition in England, followed by Arthur Uloth on the Age of Annihilation and then by John Bishop on Aspects of Anarchism. Rita Milton spoke on Reason and Romanticism on May 30th.

As Sansom noted the Club lent its space to an African group calling for independence in Nigeria, Kenya and what became Tanzania. Thus for example the Nigerian Mani Obiahigbon gave An Analysis of African Nationalism on November 28th 1954 whilst George Padmore spoke on Nationalism and Tribalism in Africa on September 25th, 1956.

These meetings were attended by among others the novelist Doris Lessing and the Labour MP Tom Driberg.

In addition to the Sunday lectures there were informal evening discussions on every Thursday at 7.30 pm.

A three speed gramophone (33, 45 and 78 rpm) was acquired in summer of 1954 and there was a recital of Caruso records on July 21st with George Plume (1) officiating.

On October 24th Albert Grace spoke on Direct Action in the Docks followed the following Sunday, Oct. 31st by Philip Sansom on The Anarchist Revolution. The January 1st 1955 issue of Freedom announced that the Club had been running for seven months with 242 evenings of events out of 245 days since its opening.

A Youth Group was created which organised social events as well as its own

lectures. In addition they performed skits, parodies songs and sketches. The Youth Group put on an Anarchist Film Festival on February 26th 1955.

The satirical element at the Club was strong with Colin Ward reminiscing that “My fondest recollections are of satirical songs devised and performed by Philip, accompanying himself by drumming on a cardboard box”. The satirical revues and sketches predated the so-called trailblazing TV show That Was The Week that Was (1962-63) and the satirical club The Establishment (founded 1961) by several years.

Philip Sansom noted in Freedom that “some delicious food is prepared by our girl comrades”

(!!!!)

The 8th Anarchist Summer School was held in the Club on the August Bank Holiday 1954

with on Saturday Geoffrey Ostergaard speaking on Anarchism and the Labour Movement and the question of participation in it and the snares of reformism; this was followed by Tony Gibson and the Mythology of The Class Struggle. On Sunday John Hewetson spoke in the morning on the Sociological Aspects of Anarchism and in the afternoon the participants in the School moved to Speakers Corner at Hyde Park, where speeches were given and propaganda handed out. Sunday evening a social was organised. Bonar Thompson gave a speech from Cyrano de Bergerac and a monologue on The Soldier: “I don’t think-I obey”.

The social ended with an informal sing song. On Monday Sam Fanaroff spoke on The Anarchist. Apart from the London comrades attending the Summer School, anarchists attended from Sheffield, Middlesbrough, Gosport, Southampton, Exeter, Preston, and Glasgow (one of the Glasgow comrades returning directly from an anarchist summer camp in Italy).

On May 7th 1955 Bonar Thompson read from Dickens, Wilde and Shaw with excerpts from Shakespeare. As Sansom remarked “We also lent our space to the great old speaker Bonar Thompson”. This seasoned orator and regular speaker at Hyde Park, had been active in the anarchist movement up until after World War One, but then had withdrawn from anarchism.

A mild hankering after the old days must have given him the impetus to meet up

with anarchists again and he had a regular Wednesday evening session given over to recitals and performances at the Club.

The planned construction of a huge Post Office building (now itself derelict) threatened the existence of the Club and it was announced that the Club would have to be vacated by Christmas (Freedom September 24th, 1955). However the Club managed to carry on until early February 1956.

The Club closed for a fortnight from 17th February 1956 re-opening at 32 Percy Street on 4th March. It was the old home of Swaraj House, which had been set up in 1942 by Indian nationalists unhappy with the pro-Japanese stance of A.N Bose and P.B Seal.

The first Sunday meeting on that day was The Role of the Anarchist in the 20th Century by S.

E. Parker, Bill Willis, Campbell Smith and Dave Sinclair were thanked for cleaning, decorating and re-wiring the new venue whilst Joan Sculthorpe was equally thanked for making curtains and chair covers. The Malatesta Club activists formed a Debating Society to take part in a debating competition with other clubs in east London and the City. The first debate was with the Wanstead Forum with the motion “That centralised government is not essential to the welfare of society (Freedom, Dec 1st, 1956).

In addition a new speaking pitch was set up in Manette Street, near the Club, as a supplement to the Hyde Park pitch. “..We held meetings every Saturday night when the West end was thronged with visitors, providing audiences very different from the regulars at Hyde Park”

(Sansom). One such meeting –on the Suez crisis and the Hungarian uprising- attracted a huge crowd that ended up blocking the traffic in Charing Cross Road. One anarchist had to hurriedly run back to the Malatesta Club to collect more copies of Freedom to sell to the crowd.

Skiffle at The Malatesta Club

Naturally with the input of John Pilgrim and the then current popularity of skiffle there were regular skiffle sessions at the Malatesta Club with the Atlanta Skiffle Gang playing “from 8pm till you drop” on November 2nd, 1957 and the Scorpions skiffle band playing for the Xmas Party on December 21st of the same

year.

There was also a regular trad jazz session at the Club with a band put together from members.

Sam Fanaroff, a devotee of Reichian theories, gave a number of talks on this subject (Reichian ideas had similarly been publicised by Marie-Louise Berneri in the pages of Freedom). Sam was one of “a brilliant bunch of South African Jews” who had moved to London after the rise of the Afrikaans nationalist government in 1948 (another was Jack Rubin who became part of the team of Hyde Park anarchist speakers). Nowadays Sam Fanaroff speaks ruefully about the African nationalists who attended the Club and became brutal dictators in their turn.

One criticism offered by L.R.G and D.R (Donald Rood) in Freedom was the problem of the meeting place versus social club where “people were “playing chess on the speaker’s table until the meeting starts and playing the gramophone immediately after the meeting when people wanted to talk...” However they admitted these criticisms were insignificant compared to the Club’s enormous advantages.

Not all those who attended the Club were anarchists or on the way to being anarchists, as witness the attendance of George Plume and of the idiosyncratic SPGB taxi-driver Sammy Cash. The socialist feminist writer Juliet Mitchell who had contacts with anarchists through her attendance of Burgess Hill school and her friendship with Sansom has written about her attendance at the Club as a young woman; the novelist Colin Macinnes was another regular attender whilst the East End writer and playwright Bernard Kops appears to have visited as well. In fact he wrote a play for radio in 1988 called Kafe Kropotkin (I’ve not heard or read it) which was originally to have been entitled The Malatesta Club. Albert Meltzer dismissed it as “really about East End Jewish Stalinist with a veneer of anarchist-sounding phrases”.

The Club provided a new social space for radicals and a haven for both old and young dissidents. There was an explosion of young people living in bedsitters in the 1950s and the Malatesta Club provided a welcome space for the more progressive and disenchanted to socialise, discuss, be entertained and entertain themselves.

The Malatesta Club lasted for four years. In the end it was forced to close when inner London rents began their unrelenting surge upwards. It had been a brave experiment that introduced many to anarchist ideas and contributed to the resurgence of anarchism in Britain in later years.

(1) George Thomas Plume went to the same London school as Albert Meltzer and was a friend of his. He left the Communist Party to join the Independent Labour Party in which he was active for years. He was secretary of The Peace Pledge Union. As a conscientious objector he served six months for hitting an Army sergeant over the head with a chamber pot during World War Two.

Nick Heath

Sources:

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Photograph from the collection of Sam Fanaroff